

country, and barely edging the national average of 58.7 percent. The averages for Hispanic students are even bleaker. According to the report, 58.7 percent of Hispanic high school students graduated in 2009, well behind the national average of 63 percent - and making Pennsylvania 23rd in the nation in that category.

June 22, 2012

PALCS

["PALCS Graduation 2012 Keynote Speaker Walter D. Palmer"](#)

YouTube

July 6, 2012

Philadelphia Tribune

"Education reform in the pipeline"

Damon Williams

Reform continues to be the buzzword in education circles, and that buzz is becoming louder, thanks to a pair of developments.

Pennsylvania Governor Tom Corbett last week signed legislation that at once sets the commonwealth's education budget and enacts several phases of public education reform. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Corbett's budget invests more than \$11.35 billion in the three layers of public education, and, coupled with recent legislation that will reform both charter school funding and teacher evaluations, will lead to a smoother running and more accountable public education system.

"In order to bring about systemic changes to public education, reforms must start with those who teach in and lead our schools," Secretary of Education Ron Tomalis said in a statement released by the DOE. "Governor Corbett's initiatives will not only raise the bar for effective educators, they will ensure that every student has access to quality academic programs.

"This new approach will ensure that those who are responsible for educating Pennsylvania's students have the knowledge and skills necessary to prepare students for postsecondary success,"

Tomalis continued. "It will also provide important information for public schools to direct the more than \$500 million invested each year into professional development to areas that will impact students."

Pennsylvania now joins 22 other states in utilizing student achievement-in evaluating its teachers.

Corbett's budget has drawn considerable scorn for its use of education block grants that, in essence, decreases the overall education budget. But Corbett has repeated that painful cuts must be made in order to cut the commonwealth's \$700 million budget gap.

House Bill 1307 seems to fit right into these plans, as it further instigates education reform while providing the opportunity for the state to save money.

The bill, introduced by State Rep. Duane Milne (R-Chester County) amends the Public School Code of 1949. Milne's legislation would pave the way for the state to take over distressed schools and districts, and immediately turn them into charter schools.

Milne's plan would also call for the creation of an education Chief Recovery Officer at the state level, a position not unlike that currently held by Thomas Knudsen, the CRO of the School District of Philadelphia.

According to the amendment, a school/district can be considered in a distressed financial state if it meets any of these criteria: has failed to pay its staff for ninety days; has outstanding tuition due to another school district that has gone unpaid as of January 1 of each school year; hasn't paid its board of directors; has defaulted on bond payment; operates at a deficit greater than the value of its holdings, and has contracted a loan without DOE approval.

A takeover-handover of distressed schools into charter leaders is an idea long supported by Dr. **Walter D. Palmer**, a charter school pioneer who has taken the School District of Philadelphia to court over the district's handling of certain charter school funding and enrollment issues.

Palmer says HB 1307 has a chance, if implemented correctly.

"For me, it's a good thing. Although charters aren't the cure-all for everything, it's an option and gives parents choice," said **Palmer**, founder of the North Philadelphia-based charter school bearing his

name. "The problem I continue to have is of the corporate takeover. Don't turn it over to corporations to run them. We don't want Education Management Organizations [EMO's] to run these schools."

The bill, however progressive, will not contribute financially to any of the affected school districts - and unless funding is part of any plan, it is doomed to fail, said Pennsylvania Senator Wayne D. Fontana.

"The drastic reduction in basic education funding imposed by the [Corbett] administration in last year's budget has resulted in a growing number of distressed schools and has forced school districts to cut teachers, counselors and other essential staff, reduce the number of textbooks that can be purchased, eliminate arts and music programs and other extracurricular activities while class sizes grow," Fontana said. "Unless we provide adequate funding and give school districts the resources they need, the list of distressed school districts across the commonwealth will continue to grow.

"It is important to remember that the biggest losers in all this are the students," Fontana continued. "We owe it to our children to find solutions that enable them to get the best education possible. This legislation further compromises students in distressed schools, as it does not address the biggest need - which is adequate funding and support."

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Philadelphia Tribune

"House bill would tighten charter school rules"

Damon Williams

Although it mirrors Senate Bill 1115 in that it alters the Public School Code, House Bill 2661 would reform and add additional checks to the funding of charter and cyber-charter schools.

Introduced last week by State Rep. James Roebuck and buoyed by bipartisan support throughout the state, HB 2661 proposes several changes, including limiting unassigned balances on the accounting books of charter and cybercharter schools, essentially limiting these schools' reserve funds; eliminating the so-called pension "double dip" loophole; lowering the perstudent funding for specialneeds students; requiring annual audits by the Department of Education and finally, it would